

AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE WINFIELD DUNN ADMINISTRATION
INTERVIEW WITH
JOHN DIEHL

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TRANSCRIBER - BETTY WILLIAMS
ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH OFFICE
MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY

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JULY 16, 1975

BY CHARLES W. CRAWFORD

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ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH OFFICE

MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY



Diehl, John

MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY
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PLACE Johnson City, Tennessee

DATE July 16, 1975.

John Diehl
(Interviewee)

Charles W. Crawford
(For the Mississippi Valley Archives of the John Willard Brister Library of Memphis State University)



THIS IS THE ORAL HISTORY OFFICE OF MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY. THIS PROJECT IS THE "ORAL HISTORY OF THE WINFIELD DUNN ADMINISTRATION." THE INTERVIEW IS WITH MR. JOHN F. DIEHL. THE DATE IS JULY 16, 1975. THE PLACE IS JOHNSON CITY, TENNESSEE. THE INTERVIEW IS BY DR. CHARLES W. CRAWFORD, DIRECTOR OF THE MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH OFFICE. TRANSCRIBED BY BETTY WILLIAMS. INTERVIEW #1

DR. CRAWFORD: Mr. Diehl, I suggest we start with some background biography of you including some information about when and where you were born, your family, your education and your experience up until you met Winfield Dunn, which I suppose was in about 1970.

MR. DIEHL: Yes sir, Dr. Crawford. I was born and raised in Defiance, Ohio and finished my high school education there and went to Defiance College for about two years. Then I left college and went into the family business. At the time we were in the brewing business. We had a small family brewery that had been started by my grandfather in 1870. I spent most of my adult life there. Well, I was born in 1919 and worked in the brewery from the time I left college until the brewery was closed in 1955. At that time the

evaporated milk business, which was also in the family, was flourishing and we were talking about expanding and opening a plant somewhere in the South. So we decided on this area and we established the Franklin Milk Company, which was a division of Diehl Incorporated. We operated Franklin Milk Company and I operated as President and General Manager of that division from 1955 until August of '73. Due to a shortage of milk supply we elected to close that plant. However, I chose to continue my residence here in East Tennessee. My family liked it real well and I liked it and I was in a position of sales for the parent company so it was just easy for me to continue my residence here, which I have done. I understand now you would like to have me tell about when I met Winfield Dunn?

DR. CRAWFORD: Yes, can you give an account of your first contact with Governor Winfield Dunn--about when it was and how it happened?

MR: DIEHL: As I recall it was in December of '69 when I had a call from a cousin of mine in Memphis to tell me that her dentist, Dr. Winfield Dunn, was thinking about running for governor. I rather had my tongue in my cheek. Nobody up here had ever heard of Winfield Dunn. In fact she told me that he didn't know many people east of Knoxville. I said, "Certainly, I'll be glad to see him." So he came in the following Saturday about noon. I met him at the airport. I don't know whether I should tell you the circumstances.

DR. CRAWFORD: Yes, I'd like to have the anecdote, please.

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MR. DIEHL: Well, it was rather humorous. I was talking to two friends at the top of the stairs when one of them said, "Are you arriving or leaving?"

And I said, "No, I am here to meet a dentist from Memphis who seems to think he can be governor of this state. He has about as much chance to be Governor of this state as I have of being president."

Just then this tall, handsome gentleman patted me on the shoulder and said, "You must be John Diehl. Your cousin surely said you were quite outspoken!" (Laughter)

At the time my daughter was with me. She was sixteen years old-- my daughter Barbara. She was quite embarrassed by it but Winfield laughed it off. We just instantly became good friends.

DR. CRAWFORD: What impressions did you form about Winfield Dunn at that time, Mr. Diehl?

MR. DIEHL: Well, at that time the first impression was the charisma that this fellow has is just something that you don't run into every day. He certainly had done his homework about people in East Tennessee who he might want to see while he was here. I was greatly impressed by the platform, if you will, that he was discussing on our drive into town the first time we met: some of the plans that he had, the directions that he thought that the state of Tennessee should be taking. So there was no question in my mind that the man was very sincere and was going to make a strong candidate, at least in my limited knowledge of politics. And it was quite limited at

some people for a year

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wife, if she had to be counted at the time I guess, would have been called a Democrat. I leaned toward the Republican Party quite strongly in fact, but despite this difference in the family we joined together in our support for Winfield Dunn. As time went on, there were several strong contenders in the primary for governor-elect--Maxey Jarman, and Bill Jenkins who had a lot of support both financial and verbal and vocal support from the people in and around Johnson City and several counties around here. However, Governor Dunn recognized the fact that he needed some support from up here. So he made several trips and I introduced him to just about anybody we ran into on the street and then by arrangement we met with a number of the county officials and people like this. As time went on a young man by the name of Frank Barnett, who was an attorney in Knoxville--in fact he was an attorney in Senator Baker's office--became interested in the Dunn campaign. He was the coordinator for upper East Tennessee both for the actual involvement as far as trying to get votes was concerned and for finances. Frank and I worked hard in this area in the primary in trying to develop some assistance for Winfield Dunn.

Then a man by the name of Bob Smith, Robert Smith from Limestone, who was a pretty astute politician, got interested in Winfield Dunn and he and I had many discussions. He worked hard in the area of finance in the primary and as well as the general election. Subsequently after the successful election of Governor Winfield Dunn, Bob Smith went with him as Commissioner of Highways. This office changed its name to Department of Transportation for this state.

DR. CRAWFORD: What kind of campaign was organized in Washington County, Mr. Diehl?

MR. DIEHL: Well for the Dunn people it was fairly small because in the primary the other people had been committed, and they had known Mr. Jarman and they had known Mr. Jenkins. So the primary was rather a dismal situation as far as the campaign was concerned. I was ashamed to tell you to the best of my recollection there were either 435 or 465 votes cast for Governor Dunn.

DR. CRAWFORD: That was in the primary?

MR. DIEHL: That was in the primary. Of course, after the primary when Winfield Dunn was governor-elect the entire party got behind him. This has always been a strong Republican area in East Tennessee and he gained ground very rapidly after the primary. He seemed to be tireless in his efforts. With a state the size of Tennessee he certainly devoted a lot of time to this area. I don't think he neglected any other area, but he was just constantly on the go. Despite the interest that I had in the campaign--that many, many people had in the campaign--I think to be fair and honest, the only thing that I can say is Governor Dunn got himself elected because of his personality and so forth.

DR. CRAWFORD: What part did you play in the campaign in Washington County, Mr. Diehl?

MR. DIEHL: Well, I organized a number of different categories for finances. For instance, I

got one of the doctors interested and he worked and got one of the attorneys interested and he worked there. Some of the industrialists reported to me and I in turn reported to Frank Barnett. Bob Smith, as I said before, worked hard in the financial endeavors.

In addition to this my family and I were doing everything to pass out cards and get bumper stickers on and things like that. I really didn't have anything to do with organizing the blocks or different voting precincts and things like that. My main interest was in the financial end of the campaign.

DR. CRAWFORD: Did you have a quota to reach in the county?

MR. DIEHL: Yes, we had a quota to reach, but it was quite unrealistic during the primary. But I forgot what it was in the general election. However, we were successful in raising it during the general election.

DR. CRAWFORD: Well, I assume it would be more difficult to get money raised when there were so many candidates as in 1970.

MR. DIEHL: Yes, that's true. Many of the old guard Republicans were committed to either one or two of the people I have mentioned prior to this.

DR. CRAWFORD: How about the payments for the campaign in Washington County; did you end the campaign in the black?

MR. DIEHL: Yes, we did. We really didn't pay our own

bills out of here. We would send the money on into Nashville and then we would suggest how we would like to have it spent here in Washington County generally. Then it was agreed upon that we could go ahead with certain types of advertising which we did. Then it was paid for out of Nashville, but we raised enough to cover our own goal up here.

DR. CRAWFORD: Do you remember about how much you spent here in the County in the primary and then in the general election?

MR. DIEHL: No sir, I don't. That would just be a guess at this particular point in time.

DR. CRAWFORD: What were your largest expenses?

MR. DIEHL: Our largest expense of course was television. This was quite limited especially in the primary. We did a very limited amount of television advertising in the primary, but we did have a lot of signs up--just posters--we were successful in getting a number of bumper stickers out. Newspaper again, we did a limited amount because of the budget in the primary. Then in the general election this expanded considerably. As they say I can't recall specific amounts. I wouldn't even want to guess at them at this time.

DR. CRAWFORD: What kind of newspaper support did you get?

MR. DIEHL: Well, in the primary, we didn't get any support to speak of from any of the editorial staff of the paper. However, in the general election the local paper, The Johnson City Press Chronicle, did support Governor Dunn. It was his-

torically a Democratic-oriented paper; however, it did support Governor Dunn and we were quite pleased at this.

DR. CRAWFORD: Now was this support in the primary or the general election?

MR. DIEHL: That was in the general election.

DR. CRAWFORD: What about the ease of collecting money? I suppose that improved after the end of the primary elections?

MR. DIEHL: Yes, it did. A number of the people who were the basic members in the Republican Party were quite generous in their support of Governor Dunn. They recognized that we had some hard competition, but they were even called on as many as two or three times and were willing to continue their giving until the job was done. These were largely wholesalers and industrialists, people who I think were sincerely interested in better government and a change in government which we got after fifty years. (Laughter)

DR. CRAWFORD: What sort of list did you prepare for solicitation? Did you consult friends, business associates, known members of the party or some other group?

MR. DIEHL: Well during the primary when I wasn't too well acquainted in the party, I went down the list in the phone book. During the years that I have been in Tennessee I have been quite active in some civic affairs. I have been on the Planning Commission and president of the Chamber of Commerce and

member of the Industrial Commission. So frankly, I just took the phone book and went through it and labored over each and every name that I thought might be prospect and worked up the list from this direction. Then I wrote them each a personal letter soliciting funds. As I said, in the primary this didn't work out too well. We did the same list in the general election and followed up with another letter explaining our position and that was a great deal more successful.

DR. CRAWFORD: Did you have any certain size of average contribution that you tried to get?

MR. DIEHL: Well, we were looking for \$25.00 you know. We had one ad in the paper that asked for a dollar or five dollars or anything that brought in a lot of small contributions. But we felt that people with \$25.00 or up had a sincere interest and would work for it. These were the kind of subscribers we were looking for.

DR. CRAWFORD: Do you remember the smallest and the largest contributions you collected?

MR. DIEHL: Well, the smallest contribution was probably a dollar and the largest single contribution was \$500.00 in cash. I had an office girl working for me at the time who was a delightful person and she gave of her time and talents to this thing freely and spent an awful lot of time at night typing letters and working on lists and keeping track of what was going on. There was a lot of this kind of contribution that was put into the campaign. There were a lot of

hours expended by a lot of people soliciting votes as well as soliciting money.

DR. CRAWFORD: Where did you open headquarters?

MR. DIEHL: Let's see, our headquarters were in a service station on North Roane Street--an abandoned service station on North Roane Street--which is the main north-south street in town. Of course, we shared this with other candidates for this was Republican headquarters for Washington County.

DR. CRAWFORD: Were you able to get Winfield Dunn in as often as you needed to address groups and speak and so forth?

MR. DIEHL: As I said before, he did spend an awful lot of time in East Tennessee. We always felt we would like to have him more. He reckoned that his strongholds were West Tennessee and East Tennessee. While we would have liked to have had him more, I think he used every effort he could to be up here. I'm talking generally about East Tennessee now. In the surrounding counties he didn't miss any of the small towns or any of the small counties. He was in Unicoi County frequently, Carter County, Sullivan, Washington, Hawkins and all of our surrounding counties.

DR. CRAWFORD: I believe you have the largest town in Johnson City of any of them, don't you?

MR. DIEHL: Yes, we do have when we consider all the people at the Veterans Administration and and the college--East Tennessee State University.

DR. CRAWFORD: You had a small vote total then in the primary. Do you remember what candidate did carry Johnson City?

MR. DIEHL: Yes, Maxey Jarman carried it.

DR. CRAWFORD: How did things change by the time votes were totaled in November? What ward vote did he get then?

MR. DIEHL: Of course, he got the majority vote. The Republicans strongly supported him and many of the Democrats too, I believe. Again, when it comes down to numbers, I can't tell you. He had a good percentage of them I am sure. Again as I say, it was personal magnetism. He had a wonderful facility for remembering faces and names which is about as complimentary a thing that you can do.

DR . CRAWFORD: What form of advertising did you feel was most effective for him in the county?

MR. DIEHL: Well, I think in the county the most effective advertising--well primarily it would have been television--but secondarily, the county newspaper has pretty good distribution for a county this size, and we did put some effort into this. Incidentally, they supported the Governor in the general campaign. It's the Herald-Tribune in Jonesboro and of course, the city newspaper has a lot of coverage in the county as well as coverage in the city. There too we had some (I don't know what you would call it, but it was) some coverage that came out of Kingsport. Some of the people in the northern part of the

county probably listen to the Kingsport television station and they do subscribe to the Kingsport newspaper. These two mediums were very strong.

DR. CRAWFORD: How closely did you work with neighboring counties--Sullivan County for example?

MR. DIEHL: We didn't work real closely with these counties. However, we did have one general meeting shortly before the general election where we invited people from all of the neighboring counties and we had lunch at one of the local restaurants and we talked about our problems and shared out problems. Then we talked about the things that were going best in each county. But that was the only general meeting that we did have. We had some of your gentlemen from Memphis who came down and addressed us that day--Billy Rachels, who was quite active in the campaign. He came to East Tennessee and addressed us. Governor Dunn had a prior committment and couldn't be with us that day; however, he told us generally how the campaign was going, how things were shaping up in Memphis and I think it gave us all a shot in the arm.

DR. CRAWFORD: Were you confident about the outcome before the November vote?

MR. DIEHL: Not until the last three or four days. I was mildly optimistic up to that point.

As it drew real close to the end and they talked to more and more people in Memphis I became quite optimistic about the outcome. I didn't make any heavy wagers though.

DR. CRAWFORD: Mr. Diehl, after Winfield Dunn became governor what happened then as far as your relations with him are concerned?

MR. DIEHL: Well, in the first place I never was a part of the administration. However, during the campaign we had built up a pretty close personal relationship. Many people knew about this because I had been with him so much. So as soon as he became governor, I got all kinds of requests: Can you have the governor come out to the County Fair? Can he speak before the Industrial Commission? We had a new mall--Johnson City Mall--he was requested to speak there, and there were just numbers of requests. Every time a school had a function going on--county school or city school--I'd get a call asking, "Can you get the Governor to come and speak to us?" Well, when he was on a campaign it was a different thing. This was where he was devoting all his time, but when he had taken on the duties of being governor of the state he just couldn't share himself as much as he had in the past. However, he did make a number of visits in East Tennessee during his administration. Things would get a little bit rocky every once in a while and he'd show up and it would smooth over again, it seemed like.

His wife was a great asset to him I thought, during his administration. She became involved in an art train that was brought into the state through several of the large manufacturing companies which put this together, so that small communities could look at the different types of art. She was the chairman of this for the state and showed up here with the train. She always presented herself so well out there on the platform. The day they were here he happened to have a day off so he came with her. It was kind of unusual to see him taking a back seat to Betty. (Laughter)

DR. CRAWFORD: Well, there were several issues that gave him difficulty in Washington County and East Tennessee. Could you comment on any of them, I suppose particularly considering the county, in the medical school issue? How do you feel that affected his situation here in the county?

MR. DIEHL: This became quite an emotional issue with a lot of people and divided a number of people in the Republican Party. Congressman Quillen was strongly supporting the medical school. Governor Dunn approached the thing from the standpoint that he wanted to be thorough in his complete study of the program. He wasn't operating on emotions and wanted to be sure that the state could support a school of this nature. I think that his thinking was very sound. The medical school which appears to be a reality now is going to be a very expensive unit for the state of Tennessee to operate. The vast majority of the people in the county spoke out strongly in Washington County and Johnson City, of course, for the medical school.

Because of this I think Governor Dunn lost a lot of his popularity in the stand ~~that~~ he took on the medical school. I felt that his thinking was sound and of course, the accusations that were made here were that he was from Memphis. The people from Knoxville were strongly supporting him and they wanted the school down there and there were many different stories going around. But despite that, when he would show up here it seemed like things would quiet down a little bit. But all in all, he did lose quite a bit of his popularity due to his stand on the medical school.

As far as this regional prison concept, I firmly believe in it and strongly support that whether it be Governor Winfield Dunn or who it may be. I had one of my employees who was in prison in Nashville while Governor Dunn was in office and I had an occasion to go down and take this fellow's wife down to the penitentiary. It was the only time she got to see him for two years. Had we had a regional prison in upper East Tennessee they would have been able to see each other. I think things would have been a lot easier for him and for her. This is one personal case I cite, but I just cannot understand with the amount of money that has already been spent in Morristown, why this prison does not go through. It just seems to me an awful waste of money and an awful miscarriage of justice.

DR. CRAWFORD: Do you feel that it hurt him politically in Washington County?

MR. DIEHL: Yes, both of these things did although we are not that close. We are forty miles from Morristown or fifty. But the biggest thing that hurt him up here, and I believe it did hurt him politically, was his stand on the medical school.

DR. CRAWFORD: What about the issue of roads? Was that handled to the satisfaction of the people in Washington County?

MR. DIEHL: It certainly should have been. If they would just look at statistics and realize how many millions of dollars were spent in Upper East Tennessee by the Dunn Administration as opposed to the money that was spent in West Tennessee. Everybody said, "We had it coming." That's right, maybe we did have it coming, but nobody did it until Winfield Dunn came in. But despite the

great strides that he made with our road system in East Tennessee, people forgot that in a hurry when the medical school came up. I heard an editorial on one of our radio stations and after I heard it I went out and talked to them and showed them some statistics on the roads. And they said, "That isn't what we were talking about at all." And I said, "Will you talk about that?" And they said, "No." They were still belaboring the medical school.

DR. CRAWFORD: Do you feel he has less support in Washington County than he did at the time of the general election?

MR. DIEHL: Yes, sir, I believe he does.

DR. CRAWFORD: I know this is just a guess, but do you believe the loss could be repaired?

MR. DIEHL: I very definitely think it could be. I think that as time goes on and if he gets more exposure up here that he will be able to repair these damages. I hope that this is not the end of the political career of Winfield Dunn. I feel sure that he could regain a lot of strength in East Tennessee.

DR. CRAWFORD: Are there any other things, Mr. Diehl, that you would like to put on the historical record about the Dunn Administration.

MR. DIEHL: When the governor went in, he instituted in each county of the state a committee called "Citizens for Better Government." These people had no authority to hire or fire, but I liked his approach to it. I was fortunate to be ap-

pointed to Washington County Citizens for Better Government.

DR. CRAWFORD: This was generally known as the "patronage committee", wasn't it?

MR. DIEHL: Yes, I believe that's right. But we did not have the ability or the authority to hire and fire. We strictly made recommendations. We were charged with this responsibility--try to find the best person for the job. Actually I suppose if you came right down to it, and there were two people equally qualified we would have leaned toward the Republican, but nevertheless, his approach to it was that [whether] he was the best qualified person he could find for each job. We didn't go out and have a wholesale slaughter of jobs or anything like this. We did make some recommendations with the capacity in which we operated. I also, during the time in office, was invited to attend the Republican Governors Conference in Memphis in November of 1973. At the time Governor Dunn was chairman or president or whatever the title is for Republican Governors and we were invited to all the meetings except the one where President Nixon showed up. I thought the way they all recognized him as a good, sound, solid administrative head for the state.

DR. CRAWFORD: Thank you, Mr. Diehl.



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